

Aspects of pluricentric German

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Abstract

The contribution will focus on aspects of pluricentricity in spoken Standard German. After a brief overview over the historical and dialectal background of the linguistic diversity in the German speaking area, the regionally balanced speech-corpus "German today" is presented, which has been collected for the analysis of the (regional) variation of spoken Standard German. Aspects of pluricentric German will be discussed by means of both the distribution of certain phonetic variables and a short analysis of regional differences in the use of certain conversational constructions. It is argued that pluricentric structures are constituted by a set of linguistic features on different levels of description. Above all, the analysis tries to reveal traces of the impact of both traditional dialects and national or even subnational political units on the constitution of the standard varieties.

Keywords: conversational constructions, German, national and subnational standard varieties, regional phonetic variation, spoken (colloquial) standard

1. Pluricentric Standard German: Historical and dialectal background

On the linguistic level of traditional base dialects, the German speaking area shows a huge dialectal diversity. The diversity of dialectal German reflects to some degree the former political and territorial fragmentation of the German speaking area. Up to the 19th century, there were several political and cultural centres (e.g. Augsburg, Berlin, Cologne, Meißen/Dresden, Vienna) with changing political importance and power; the atomistic political structure without a dominating centre of power was based above all on the long lasting and far reaching political autonomy which regional principalities/electorates and free cities had gained in the Middle Ages. Unlike the standard varieties in politically less polycentric societies like Denmark, France or England, the norms of Standard German are not founded on a specific area or the linguistic model given by a powerful capital (see Auer 2005: 21).

The homogenization of written German can be considered a process of sociolinguistic rule selection from different areas – above all from the High German area, and especially from East-Middle and Upper German – starting at least in the 16th century, and leading to a fixed orthographic norm for the German-speaking area at the break of the 20th Century.¹ An orthoepic norm has been fixed at the break of the 20th century as well, but without a preceding process of variant-netting or rule-selecting. The orthoepic codex has been set on the basis of the opinion of a few experts – the so-called "Siebs-commission" –, orientated

1. See e.g. Besch (2003) for a comprehensive overview of the standardisation process of (written) German.

to the artificial articulation of the theatre, and heavily influenced by the then prestigious northern German patterns of non-dialectal articulation.² In contrast to the 'successful' standardization of written German, traditional regional differences in the use of spoken German have persisted well into the 20th century.

In German dialectology, three main dialect-areas with major bundles of linguistic isoglosses have been distinguished (according to different outcomes of the second German sound shift): There are the Low German dialects in the north of Germany, Middle German dialects in the centre of Germany, in Eastern Belgium and Luxemburg, and Upper German dialects in the southern part of Germany, Switzerland, Austria and in Northern Italy (Southern Tirol).³ The linguistic concept of High German is constituted by all Middle and Upper German dialects (see the continuous line between the Low and High German area in Figure 1).

Our basic hypothesis is that traces of the regional differences are still perceptible in the forms of the spoken German Standard(s).

2. Project *Variation of spoken German*

The project's main target is a corpus-based description of the linguistic variation in spoken Standard German with the focus on the areal distribution of linguistic variables.

Therefore, we first collected an adequate database, the corpus *Deutsch heute* ("German Today"), which was collected from 2006 to 2009 and contains speech data from 830 speakers.⁴ We recorded 670 secondary school students, aged 16-20, from 167 different cities, and 170 speakers, aged 50-60, recruited at 80 adult education centres.

Each speaker was recorded in a set of different situations with different communicative tasks (in the sense of different "contextual styles", cf. Labov 1966). The corpus contains recordings of a) read speech (with a formality-continuum ranging from minimal pairs, an extensive wordlist, constructed sentences to complex texts), b) specifically elicited non-read speech (elicited by a translation and picture naming task), and c) spontaneous speech (from a sociolinguistic interview and a map-task experiment).

The grid of recording-sites covers the whole German-speaking area of Europe, where German has at least the status of a co-official language: Austria, Eastern Belgium, Germany, Liechtenstein, Luxemburg, Southern Tirol and Switzerland.

2. Auer (2005: 18) points to a plausible reason for the high prestige of northern German articulation of the standard. Since the Low German vernacular(s) spoken in northern Germany had been (socio-) linguistically detached from the (High) German standard, the northern articulation of the standard – "from some point in time in the late 18th century onwards" – was considered to be more elegant and pure than in the High German area of its origin, where it was "subject to change from below".

3. See e.g. the dialect-classification of the German-speaking area in Wiesinger (1983).

4. See for a corpus description Brinckmann *et al.* (2008).

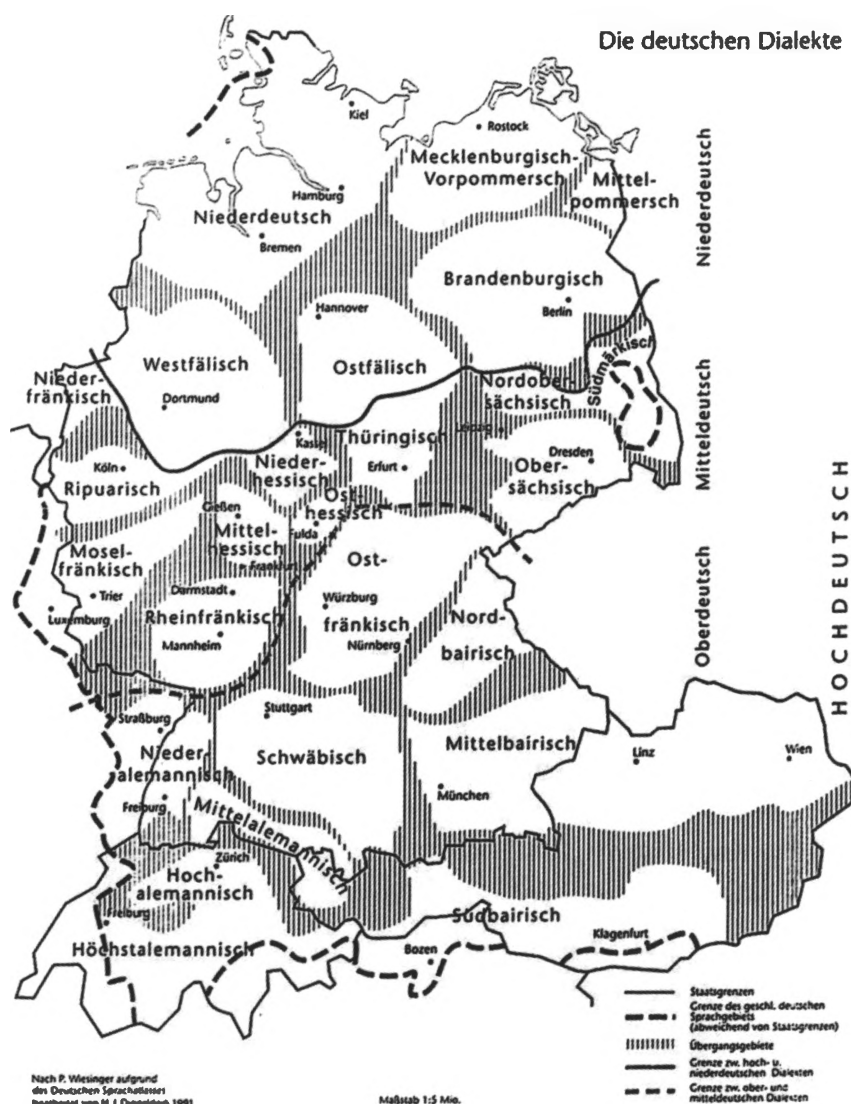


Figure 1. Map of German dialect areas based on Wiesinger (1983), drawn from Dingeldein (2001)

3. Analysis: Examples of areally based variation of spoken Standard German

On the basis of our corpus data we want to give a comprehensive description of the linguistic features of regionalized and/or nationalised Standard German. Therefore, we make particular use of traditional linguistic maps to illustrate the areal distribution of variables: What we want to know is whether their distribution is sensitive to the forms of the corresponding dialect, and/or to political units.

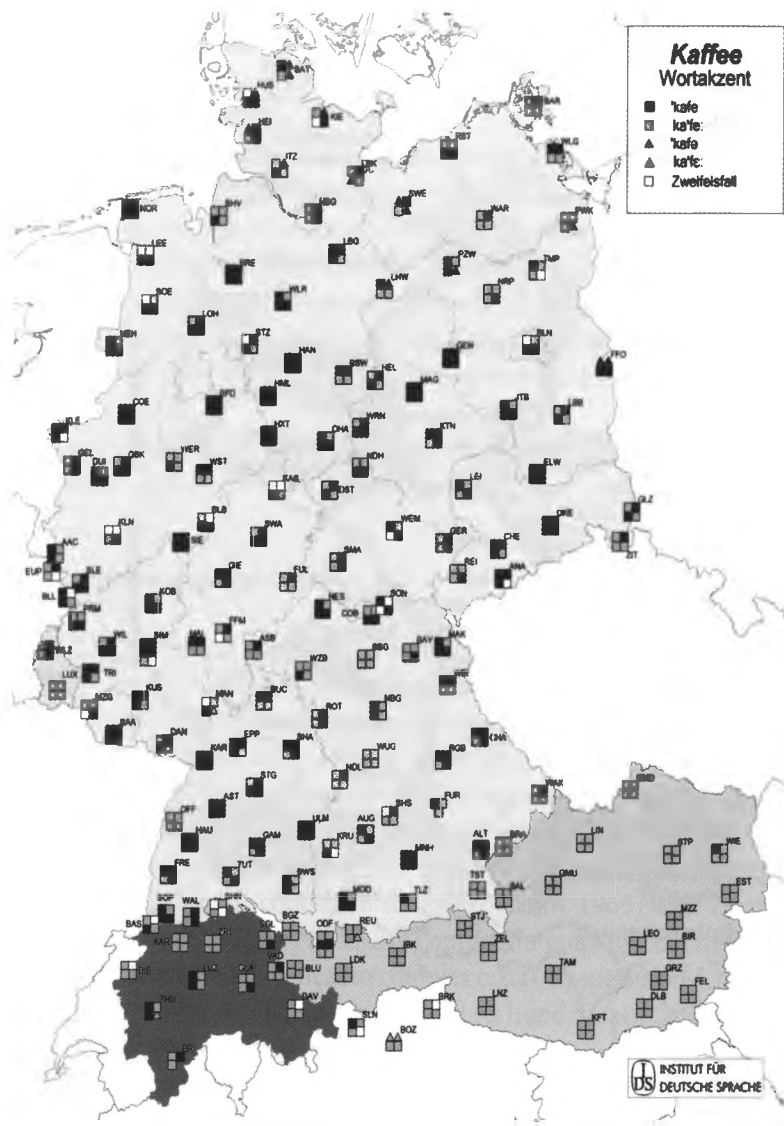


Figure 2. Stress pattern of <Kaffee> ('coffee') in the wordlist-data of the secondary school students

3.1. Stress pattern of <Kaffee> ('coffee')

The following example shows the areal distribution of the stress pattern of the lexical item <Kaffee> ('coffee') in the wordlist data of the students. According to German pronunciation dictionaries, <Kaffee> can be stressed either on the first or on the second syllable. And according to the data of our main corpus of young speakers, there is no region in Germany where one of the two possible stress patterns is predominant (see Figure 2).

But in Switzerland and even more consistently in Austria and Southern Tirol, stress falls regularly on the second syllable (marked by pale grey squares in Figure 2). So what we see is a clear case of an Austrian (and in tendency also Swiss) national variant as opposed to a mix of both stress types in Germany. And there is also a regionally distributed variant of the stressed first syllable type with a final schwa instead of a full vowel, showing mainly in the north of Germany (marked by dark grey triangles appearing above all in the northern German federal state of Schleswig-Holstein).

3.2. *Articulation of <Ch> in <Chemie> ('chemistry')*

In the second example, the initial consonant of the word <Chemie> ('chemistry') is mapped (Figure 3). In German pronunciation dictionaries, the initial consonant has only the single codified form of palatal fricative [ç]. But at least in our data, only a minority of the German-speaking population actually uses the codified form; in this sense, Figure 3 can be considered one of several examples for the gap between the codified norms of German pronunciation dictionaries and the real-world articulations of Standard German.

In our data from the students, quantitatively at least, three main variants and further secondary variants show up: the codified variant [ç] (marked by white squares) is concentrated mainly in the northern areas of Germany, with scattered occurrences everywhere else; note especially the secondary concentration of the orthoepic form in Switzerland. The second fricative variant, postalveolar [ʃ] (marked by the dark grey diamond symbol) can be heard in the north as well, but is predominant in the Middle German areas of central Germany. In the same area, the sound [ç̥] (pale grey diamonds), which is articulatorily in the middle between [ç] and [ʃ], is the minority variant. In the south of Germany, Austria and South Tirol, aspirated plosives of the type [kʰ], and palatal affricates of the type [kç] (both types marked by pale grey circles) are the major variants. At a few places in North Tirol, velar affricates of the type [kx] are documented (including uvular variants of the affricate, both marked by dark grey circles).

The greatest diversity of variants can be found in Switzerland, where beside the codified form and the plosive or affricate variants the velar fricative [x] represents a genuine Swiss form. The heterogeneity in Switzerland is, on the one hand, due to dialectal differences in Switzerland (e.g. with basically velar and uvular fricatives, but also with plosives or affricates especially in Basel or Davos), and on the other hand to the speakers' orientation to forms from Germany (southern German plosives as well as orthoepic fricatives in the formal situation of the Interview with a German interviewer).

The Austrian variants [kç] and [kʰ] are also predominant in southern Germany. In Germany, they are documented only in the two states of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, more or less irrespective of traditional dialect areas. Note e.g. the plosive forms in the city of Aschaffenburg (ASB), which politically belongs to Bavaria, but is situated in the Rhine-

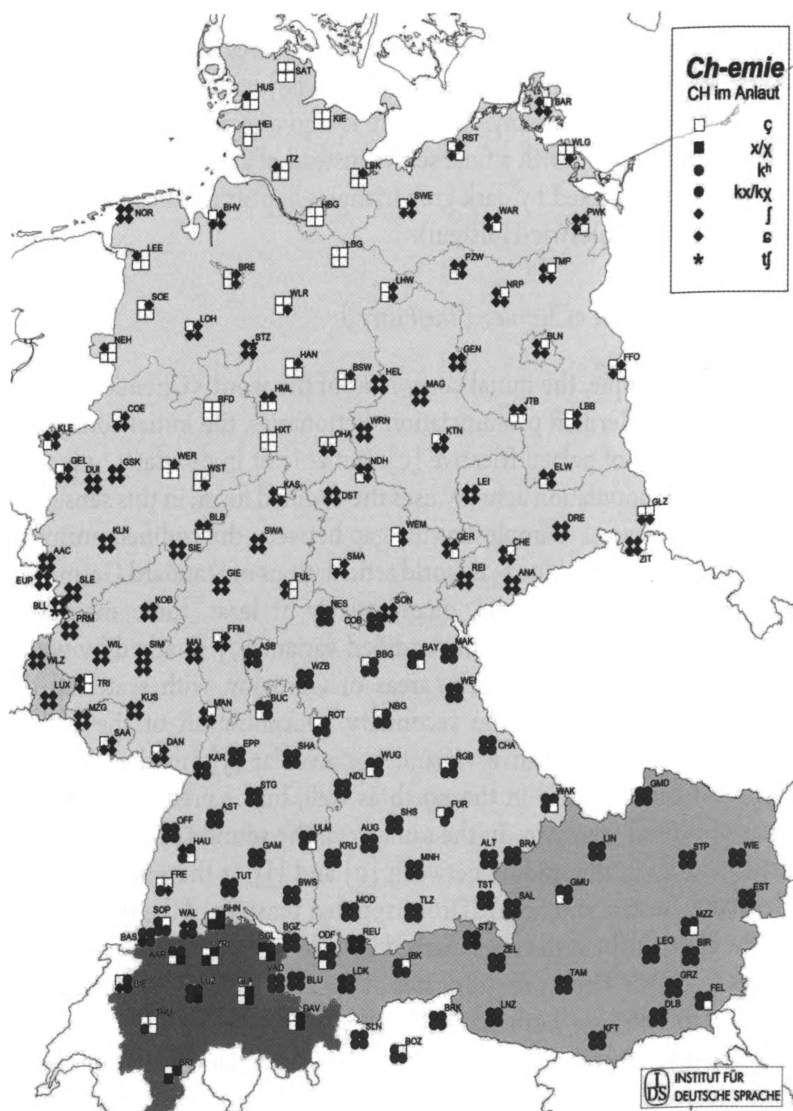


Figure 3. Articulation of <Ch> in <Chemie> ('chemistry') in the wordlist-data of the students

Franconian area, where traditionally the /S/ is the unmarked form. The impact of political borders can also be seen in the East-Franconian area, where the neighbouring cities of Coburg (COB) and Sonneberg (SON) show different forms of the variable. We got plosives in the Bavarian town of Coburg, whereas in the city of Sonneberg, situated in the same dialect area as Coburg but politically belonging to the federal state of Thuringia, the fricative form is dominating. In the case of Aschaffenburg as well as Sonneberg, the dialect divergent

realization patterns of word-initial <Ch> in <Chemie>, which is an important subject of the school curriculum, might be explained as an effect of the federal organization of the German educational system.

3.3. *Phonetic variants: the impact of (sub)national borders and traditional dialect areas*

The two examples of phonetic variation indicate that the distribution of Standard German pronunciation variants can be sensitive both to national or even subnational political borders – as is the case with the Austrian variant [ka'fe:], or the plosive realization of <ch> in the Middle German dialect area at the northwestern and northeastern periphery of the federal state of Bavaria – and to the forms of the corresponding dialect – like in the <Chemie> example, where the stable occurrence of the plosive form across the German-Austrian border hints to the traditional Bavarian dialect continuum.

But we also see that there are cases where neither the concept of national variants nor that of traditional dialect areas can exclusively account for the areal distribution of the linguistic variants – as can be seen, e.g., in the variable phonetic realization of the initial sound of <Chemie> within Switzerland, where the genuine Swiss form [x] shares its area of occurrence with two other variants that are most frequently used outside of Switzerland.

3.4. *Areally based variation of constructional patterns*

In the following section, we focus on the variation of constructional patterns as a possible aspect of pluricentric German. With a preliminary study of regional impacts on the use of grammatical constructions we want to scrutinize whether nationally and/or regionally orientated variation of spoken German Standard is perceptible on more complex levels of linguistic description than just mere (allo-)phonic variation. Therefore, the use of two metalinguistic constructions in the ca. 830 sociobiographic interviews of the corpus has been analysed. The constructions focused have in common that they involve a complement-taking verbum dicendi/sentiendi, and they both are used in a modalising/hedging function. The constructions referred to are 1) <(ich) glaube (ich)> ('I think'), and 2) <ich meine> ('I mean').

3.4.1. <ich meine> ('I mean')

In our interview-corpus, we found more than 1200 instances of the construction <ich meine> ('I mean'). For the analysis, all these instances had been classified according to semantic-functional characteristics. The categorization is based on the analyses of the construction in Günthner/Imo (2003) and Imo (2007). To a certain extent, syntactic features correlate with the semantic-pragmatic features distinguished.

TYPE 1. The first category includes instances of <ich meine> carrying the semantic load of either a) 'I have in mind', b) 'I think (and am not sure)' or c) 'in my opinion'. From a functional perspective, the instances of this type are used a) to clarify reference, b) to express a con- or dissent opinion, or c) to indicate the uncertain/approximate status of the proposition (or lexical item(s)) in scope. With these semantic-functional criteria, certain syntactical features correlate: <ich meine>-constructions of this semantic-functional type are either used within the structure of a) a main clause with a direct object or object correlate, b) a matrix sentence followed by a subordinated complement clause, or, in the majority of the cases, c) a matrix clause followed by a dependent main clause.

TYPE 2. The instances grouped under the label of the second category have the semantic load of 'I say'; that means, the lexical meaning of the verb has faded, and it more or less refers to an announcement of an utterance. It is used above all in a discourse structuring function, e.g. to indicate a change of activity, a change of perspective or focus. In this sense, a vast majority of cases in the corpus are used as concession markers preparing a *but*-prefaced (counter-)argument. Syntactically, all the instances of the second category are used either a) within a matrix clause followed by a dependent main clause, or, much less frequently, b) in pre-front-field position.⁵

In the following extract from an interview, the interviewee (S2) uses the construction twice, giving examples of both functional types distinguished in the analysis (type 1 in line 03, and type 2 in line 06). In the preceding context of the extract, the interviewer (S1) asked whether S2 knew an area where the spoken Standard would best match the codified norm. In her answer in line 01, S2 refers to the city of Hannover as the place where the best German would be spoken.⁶

Example 1:⁷

- (1) S2: man hat=s mir gesagt es wäre Hannover
 Ü: I was told that it was Hannover
- (2) S1: hmhm und wer hat ih=n das gesagt? (0.5)
 Ü hmhm and who told you this?

5. See Imo (2005) for a syntactical and functional analysis of a discourse oriented use of 'I mean' in spoken English. For Imo (2005: 31) syntactic autonomy, which is given at least in the topological pre-front-field, is an syntactic indicator of the use of <I mean> as a discourse marker.

6. The opinion that Hannover is the place where the 'best' German is spoken is widely spread at least in Germany; it can be considered an established stereotype or even a myth.

7. The extracts are transcribed using the GAT2 conventions for "minimal transcriptions" (Selting et al. 2009). Capitals mark the main accent of an intonation phrase; the numbers in brackets identify the duration of pauses (in seconds). The original German utterances are translated non-literally (lines prefaced by Ü); utterances with the constructions in focus (marked by an arrow) are furthermore literally translated (ÜL).

- (3) S2: → **ich MEIne** ich hab das mal irgendwo gelesen oder so etwas
 Ü I think I have read it somewhere or something like this
 ÜL *I mean I have it once somewhere read or s.t. like that*
- (4) S2: äh ich kann=s ih=nich mehr genau san aber <<p>(man) ich>(1)
 Ü äh I can't tell you exactly but <<p>(one) I> (1)
- (5) S2: ich weiß nich mal-
 Ü I don't even know-
- (6) S2: → **ich mein** ich hab mal mit jemand darüber diskutIERT-
 Ü I mean I have once discussed it with somebody
 ÜL *I mean I have once with someone about it discussed*
- (7) S2: weiß aber nich mehr mit WEM- (0.8)
 Ü but I don't remember with whom
- (8) S2: aber man hat mir gesagt hanNOver-
 Ü but I was told (that) hannover
- (9) S2: oder han/ oder hannover GLAUBT, (0.4)
 Ü or han/ or hannover thinks
- (10) S2: dass ihn da-
 Ü that they there
- (11) S2: dort würde man das (.) BEStE (0.6)
 Ü there the best
- (12) S2: das REINste hochdeutsch sprechen.
 Ü the purest High German would be spoken.

The two utterances in line 03 and 06 share the same syntactic structure. The first person form of the verb <meinen> (to 'mean') is used in a matrix sentence, which is followed by a supposed complement in form of a dependent main clause. But on the semantic-functional level of description, the two utterances differ. In line 03, the use of <ich meine> conveys the meaning of "I think (but I am not sure) that", providing an epistemic frame for the juxtaposed proposition (*I have read it somewhere*). The introduced epistemic stance of uncertainty is marked by the hedging expansion which follows the proposition (*or something like this*), and it is explicitly expressed in line 04 (*äh I can't tell you exactly*). In contrast, the epistemic frame introduced by the matrix-clause in line 06 is different. Although she is not sure whether or even where she has read about the Hannover issue, she is sure that she has had a discussion on it. The main function of the <ich meine>-construction in line 06 is to segment her discourse by indicating a change of her focus. As a "cut-marker" (Imo 2005: 15) it indicates

that the continuation projected in the preceding utterance (*I don't even know-*, line 05) will be cut out, and a new projection is opened by the <ich meine>-construction.

Besides the semantico-functional differences, the two instances of <ich meine> in example 1 show formal differences. In the first instance, where the construction introduces an epistemic stance by carrying a semantic load (type 1), the verb is accented. Furthermore, the form is not phonetically reduced. In the discourse-oriented use in line 06 (type 2), the form is not accented, and it is phonetically realized without final vowel. Both formal differences are typical for the two functional types distinguished.

The vast majority of the instances of <ich meine> ('I mean') in the interviews is used in a discourse-oriented function with faded semantic content: 1144 of altogether 1247 instances were classified as function type 2. In the analysis, we furthermore distinguished between the use of unreduced and reduced realization forms of the construction – that means between forms with and without final schwa.

	sem-funct. type 1 (semantic load)	Sem-funct. type 2 (discourse structuring)	total
full form [iç mainə]	64 (35% of full forms) (5% of 1266)	119 (65% of full forms) (9,4% of total)	183
reduced form [iç main]	58 (5% of reduced forms) (4,6% of total)	1025 (95% of reduced forms) (81% of total)	1083
	122	1144	1266

Table 1

Correlating the functional types (columns) and the formal feature of morpho-phonological reduction (rows) in Table 1, we see a dominant combination: more than 80% of all instances are reduced forms in discourse-structuring function. Looking at the function type 1 usage, we see that a little more than half of all the 122 instances of this functional type are realized with a full form. In 119 cases, the full form is used in a predominantly discourse structuring function. Looking at the regional distribution of these 119 cases, two areas stick out. First of all, there are 41 instances of full form usage of <ich meine> with faded semantic load (from 22 different speakers) in the eastern part of the Middle German area (above all in Saxony). Furthermore, there are 38 instances of this rare function-form-combination in the Alemannic based area, but the occurrence is restricted to Switzerland and Liechtenstein. On the other hand, there are regions without a single case: the Alemannic based area of southwestern Germany, the Bavarian area (neither in Germany, Austria or northern Italy), and the East-Frankonian area (besides one instance in Thuringian Sonneberg). In these areas, full forms are exclusively used with lexico-semantic load, and never as a discourse particle.

What we see is a general tendency towards a form-function-correlation between full form and function type 1, i.e. between full form and full semantic load. This one-directional correlation is without exception in the Alemannic area of Germany and the (Austro-)Bavarian part of Upper German. The correlation is not established in Switzerland and in the area of eastern Middle German: there, unreduced forms are used in discourse structuring function as particles with faded semantic load. The reasons for that can be found in the corresponding dialects/regiolects. Neither in certain dialect areas of Switzerland, nor in the regiolect of eastern Middle German, schwa-deletion is a common feature. Furthermore, in Switzerland there is a general orientation to use unreduced forms in spoken Standard German, which is due to general differences in the sociolinguistic setup between Switzerland and the other German-speaking nations. In 'diglossic' Switzerland, the standard variety is detached from the private domain, and it is predominantly used as a kind of functional lect or style in specific public contexts. The Swiss' (general) orientation to use full forms in the interviews can even be considered an indication to the standard's status of a 'non-native-like' variety in Switzerland.

3.4.2. <(ich) glaube (ich)> ('I think')

In the interview corpus there are more than 6000 instances of (supposedly) complement taking predicate <(ich) glaube (ich)>. In contrast to <ich meine>, the construction is not on its way to convert to a discourse particle. Roughly speaking, the construction's basic function is to subjectify an utterance by modifying the validness and ambit of the issue in the scope of the construction. In this sense, it functions as an "epistemic parenthetical" (Thompson/Mulac 1991). From an syntactic point of view, <(ich) glaube (ich)> is topologically more flexible than <ich meine>, which, to certain extents, is restricted to the front-field position.⁸

In our analysis, we concentrated on the use of the construction in the topological middle- or back-field. Above all, we looked for occurrences of the construction without the subject pronoun, which is required according to standard grammar. Instances without subject pronoun like in example 2 would indicate that the presumed complement taking construction is on its way to be used as an adverb-like "epistemic fragment" (Thompson/Mulac 1991).

Example 2

In the preceding context of example 2, the interviewee, a high school student, has complained about teachers who force students to write too much class tests in too short a period of time; in the following extract, she adds evidence to her general reproach. Typically, the student marks the approximate character of her evidence (fourteen tests in four

8. See Imo (2005) and (2007) for an in-depth analysis of the construction.

weeks) by the use of the <(ich) glaube (ich)>-construction. Interestingly, the modalising construction is used without preceding nor following first person pronoun:

S2: wir ham in vier wochen *glaub* vierzehn klausurn gschriebn
oder so

UL: we have in four weeks *think* fourteen class tests written or so

The analysis of the interviews revealed 95 occurrences of the pronounless morphologically reduced /glaub/⁹ positioned in the syntactic middle- or back-field, used in modalising function. However, the geographic reach of pronounless /glaub/ is restricted. All of the 95 cases occur in the High German area, of which 81 instances (from 47 different speakers) occur in the whole Alemannic area, which crosses three national borders area: 7 instances in Vorarlberg (the Alemannic part of Austria), 17 in Switzerland (including Liechtenstein), and the rest in the North-Alemannic and Swabian-Alemannic area of southwest Germany. Thus, the use of reduced /glaub/ indicates an areally bound peculiarity: In the Alemannic area, the complement taking predicate <(ich) glaube (ich)> appears to be further down the road on its way to convert to an epistemic fragment (or epistemic modal particle). As the restricted geographic reach of /glaub/ suggests, the development might well be an incidence of “change from below” caused by structural influence of the Alemannic dialects (where the ‘fragmented’ use of <(ich) glaube (ich)> is common).

4. Conclusion

Areally based variation, and with this, aspects of pluricentricity of spoken Standard German are discernible on different levels of linguistic structure. The data of the *Deutsch heute*-corpus hints at the existence of national and regional varieties of spoken Standard German constituted by different sets of linguistic features. Above all, the variation of phonetic variables indicates to the impact of both the traditional dialects and national or even subnational political entities on the constitution of the standard varieties. Besides more or less striking phonetic differences, traces of dialectally and politically based pluricentric structures are also identifiable in the use and formation of constructional patterns.

9. In all 95 cases, the lack of the pronoun co-occurs with the deletion of final schwa.

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